

THE DIGITAL *DASEIN* OF CHINESE RURAL MIGRANTS

As Miller and Slater (2000: 5) argue, “If you want to get to the Internet, don’t start from there... we need to treat Internet media as continuous with and embedded in other social spaces, that they happen within mundane social structures and relations that they may transform but that they cannot escape into a self-enclosed cyberian apartness”. In the light of these reflections on digital anthropology, this paper aims to understand the use of social media among young Chinese migrant workers in both offline and online contexts.

First of all, the significant “offline” context of this study is the massive domestic migration in China. In the process of ongoing urbanisation and industrialisation, the expansion of capitalism has had profoundly dislocating effects on Chinese society. By 2015, when the fieldwork was conducted, there were more than 250 million Chinese who had left their places of origin in rural China to seek employment in Chinese factory towns and cities (NBSC, 2016). These rural migrants are referred to as a “floating population,” which indicates the difficulty of settling down in urban China in the rigorous Chinese household registration (*Hukou*) system. This paper is based on 15 months of ethnographic research (2013-2015) in a small town called GoodPath¹ in south-east China. GoodPath is a typical industrial town which serves as a transitional place connecting the village and city. The local process of industrialization has turned most of the farmland (76%) into more than 60 large scale factories within a decade. Migrant workers account for two-thirds of the

resident population, which totals 62,000. Around 80% of these rural migrant workers are from a new generation born in the 1980s. Unlike the previous generations of rural migrants, who as surplus labour in rural China had no choice but to leave the countryside and make a living in cities, the younger generation of rural migrants sees rural-to-urban migration as their “rite of passage” (Fang, 2011) in which they search for self-identity and self-transformation along with attempting to meet economic needs. As extensively noted by other researchers, rural migrants have encountered discrimination and have frequently become the scapegoats for all kinds of social problems in urban China (Jacka, 2006; Ngai, 2005). Ironically, as the indispensable force for building modern China, rural migrants in post-communist China have been subjected to a process of “othering” where their very existence is characterised as “potentially hindering China from reaching modernity” (Rofel, 1999: 106). It is in this social context that this paper explores the role which social media plays in the daily life experience of young migrants.

In terms of the “online” context, the paper examines the QQ platform. During fieldwork, this was the main social media platform among rural migrants even though use of WeChat had been increasing remarkably. QQ provides a variety of different digital services, including instant messaging, social media, gaming, e-mail, video music sharing, and so on. Unlike Facebook which applies an identical look to every profile, QQ offers a great variety of formats and extra design elements for users to create their own profiles.

This paper starts with a general theoretical reflection on the relationship between place and human existence. Drawing on this discussion, the rest of the paper, based on my ethnography among Chinese rural-to-urban migrants, sets forth a dialogue between Miller’s thoughts on objectification and the Heideggerian concept of *Dasein*.

LITERATURE REVIEW: *DASEIN*, OBJECTIFICATION AND CHINESE MIGRANT WORKERS

“To be is to be somewhere” Aristotle claims (Physics IV, 208a30, cited in Malpas, 2008: 200). It is nowadays taken for granted that any distinctive culture and society “takes place” within the confines of a certain physical location. It is so taken for granted that the expression “take place” simply refers to “happen” or “come into being,” which even suggests that if there is no place to take, nothing will happen. Furthermore, for people to be recognised as active social beings, they must produce space for themselves (Lefebvre, 1991: 416). There has been an established area of research on the home and place/space making within the disciplines of sociology, anthropology, philosophy and even more extensively in human geography (e.g., Douglas, 1991; Lefebvre, 1991; Mallett, 2004; Tucker, 1994), with anthropologists emphasising cultural differences in the sense of space (e.g., Feld & Basso, 1996). The primary influence behind the ex-

isting literature on place-making has been Martin Heidegger's exploration of the "Being" of humankind, which he termed *Dasein* (Moran, 2002: 198). Rather than seeing *Dasein* as an individual entity, Heidegger argues that it can only be understood within the surrounding context, its "situatedness" (Inwood, 1997). For Heidegger, it is situatedness that gives rise to the possibilities of being (Malpas, 2006), an ongoing everyday being-in-the-world, rather than just metaphysical abstraction (Larsen & Johnson, 2012). Human existence is highlighted as being-in-the-world, as *Dasein* brings the whole world along with it and the truly existential character of human existence lies in *Dasein*'s proclivity for dwelling, that is, being alongside the world as if it were at home there (Casey, 1997: 246).

This paper deploys the concept of *Dasein* to discuss the lived experience of migrant workers in their floating life, reflecting on how individuals develop their relationship with the surrounding world in which social media plays a significant role. The discussion of *Dasein* can only make sense when seen as a process of "objectification." In *Phenomenology of spirit*, Hegel suggests that everything that people are and do arises out of the reflection of themselves provided by the mirror image of the processes through which people create form and they are themselves created (Miller, 2005: 8). Expanding on Hegel's argument, Miller (2005) takes the example of Bourdieu's "Kabyle house" to show how the dwelling becomes the cultural object within which people comprehend themselves, and how the very sophistication of the form allows people to appreciate complex possibilities for themselves within it. Specifically, in this paper, I examine the ways in which the sophisticated form of social media has allowed Chinese migrant workers to discern complex possibilities for themselves, and how access to the online environment has transformed both social media and Chinese migrant workers.

The rapidly expanding and quickening mobility of the world population since the twentieth century has created a profound sense of placelessness, a deterritorialization of identity. It is generally acknowledged that traditional ideas about the home and homeland have been challenged by the new patterns of life in the digital age. In the face of digital ubiquity, the human existential condition has become even more complicated as discussion of self-identity and cultural identity need to incorporate the consequences of digital developments as a constitutive part of people's daily lives all around the world (Rainie & Wellman, 2012; Miller et al., 2016). Anthropological studies have provided rich descriptions of the human experience of belonging and the sense of place in dislocation, migration and diaspora. Such endeavours have developed our understanding of place, revealing the spatiality of social life (e.g., Constable, 1999; Dominy, 2000; Semts et al., 2019). On the other hand, ethnographies based on virtual communities such as *Second life* (Boellstorff, 2008) and *Ciberville* (Greschke, 2012) have raised the question of "is there a home in cyberspace?" as well

as “does the virtual world in and of itself constitute a society?” This research prompts questions of how far place is regarded as something separated from experience and embodiment, or whether we can incorporate a fundamental understanding of place as the framing within which meaning and knowledge are made possible in the first place (Malpas, 2006).

Much of the fieldwork among Chinese migrant workers presents findings relevant to discussion of the issue of place: (a) following Lefebvre and Foucault, scholars have been scrutinizing “place-making” in terms of spatial disciplining and social control to rethink urbanization and modernization in China (Rofel, 1992; Bach, 2010; Wu, Zhang & Webster, 2013; Zhang, 2002); (b) from the perspective of production and consumption, there has been a thorough exploration of the daily struggle of Chinese migrant workers in a situation where people’s possibilities for living in space is now controlled by the consumer revolution in post-socialist China (Ngai, 2003); (c) acknowledging the impact of digital technologies, scholars have started to explore the ways in which the digital has been integrated into the transformation of social structures of contemporary China, empowering the previous “information-less” population to perform a modern identity (Qiu, 2009; Wallis, 2015). This paper builds upon all these prior considerations in order to interrogate them anew within the context of the daily lives of Chinese migrant workers which are taking place offline and online simultaneously.

The rest of the paper consists of three sections. Based on ethnography, each section focuses on one layer of existential experience in the context of social media use. The discussion of Being starts with concerns about the “self” and proceeds to an examination of sociality where the self is suited in the context of connections. The last section sheds light on the wider context of “situatedness” where the experience of “being-in-the-world” is facilitated by social media.

THE DESIRED SELF ON SOCIAL MEDIA

The factory owners and managers in GoodPath are overwhelmingly local people. For them, the consensus was that efficient factory production is achieved by treating “humankind as part of the machine” as a factory manager stated. The ethnography testified to the common feeling of being an “unperson” (Jackson, 2000: 2) among rural migrants in GoodPath. The social bonding between local and migrant workers in GoodPath was minimal. A survey among 238 rural migrants and 75 local people (June 2014), for instance, showed that about 72% of rural migrants reported no connection or daily communication with local people, apart from functional relations such as “factory manager/factory worker” and “landlord/tenant.” This social separation started in schools. In the local primary school, classes were divided into “outsider classes” (*waidi ban*) and “local classes” (*ben di*) with better teaching resources allocated to the “local

classes,” which only enrolled local students. The reason given was that local people were concerned that their children would pick up bad habits from the children of rural migrant families with low “human quality” (*di suzhi*). In fieldwork, migrant workers were fully aware of their inferior social status as “outsiders” with low social visibility. It was common to hear factory workers remark: “My opinion/right doesn’t matter as I am just an outsider.” Liping, a 22-year-old former factory worker, was one of them.

Liping lost her job in the factory because of a minor dispute with the line manager. She left the job without getting fully paid but abandoned any attempt to obtain redress since, as she remarked, “all the managers are local people who cover each other and don’t care about us outsiders.” The only place Liping showed her dissatisfaction was on her QQ where her post complaining about the factory was supported by several her QQ friends who were also migrant workers. “QQ is my own place... at least I say what I want to say,” Liping explained. Furthermore, Liping was a VIP on QQ (having purchased the VIP membership). Being a VIP entitled her to a variety of online privileges, from extended use of various functions to significantly enhanced visibility. As a VIP, Liping’s QQ avatar is always on top of the contact list in the chatting interface, and her QQ name was shown in bold red. In addition, Liping was also an expert in tailoring her online status. For example, she applied the “visible to somebody in invisible status” function, which allowed her to always be seen by selected contacts while in invisible status when the rest of her contacts would be unable to tell whether she was online or not:

Sometimes I just want to talk to one or two [friends] and don’t want to be disturbed by any random guys, so I set myself invisible... but for a few people I feel I can always talk to or wish they can ping me if they see me online, I set myself always visible for them, even though to others I am still invisible.

Liping reported that this setting gave her a strong feeling of being special, as she further explained, “It’s like I am always there waiting for you, you know, very close and exclusive... and it’s the way we make ourselves special for each other...”

The “self” is by no means experienced as a purely personal matter, since being a person means being treated as someone whose “personal views matter in some public, articulate, expressible sense” (Scannell, 2000). On QQ, Liping enjoyed a much-increased control of her visibility in so far as she could determine when “I set myself invisible” and this self-tailored visibility facilitated her self-perception as a “special person” who can be seen by people she cares about, rather than an unimportant outsider in GoodPath town.

JiaDa, a 23-year-old forklift truck driver, provided another example. JiaDa arranged a QQ group comprising 168 online contacts, the majority young male migrant workers. None of the images on the album of this QQ group were taken by any of the members themselves — all were obtained from the internet by

people in the group. According to JiaDa, the images worth posting were those that “look cool and modern,” images such as “modern city landscapes,” “consumer culture” (luxury cars and other goods), “sex,” “smoking,” and large sunglasses (Figure 1). Addressing the QQ group, JiaDa wrote “I hope everyone will become a person with *suzhi*.” *Suzhi*, meaning “human quality,” is deeply associated with the Chinese urban-rural divide and the nation’s modernisation since the 1980s. People in cities frequently refer to rural people, whom they regard as intrinsically inferior, as “low human quality” (*di suzhi*). In the discourse of *suzhi*, the rural lifestyle is measured on the scale of modernity and ends up being stigmatised as “backward” and a threat to the “project of national modernity” (Jacka, 2006: 31). In other words, the party-state actually claims that to enjoy the prosperity offered by economic reform, citizens must take the initiative to improve themselves, casting off their low *suzhi* dispositions. In such a conceptualization, emphasis is on individual responsibility, rather than individual rights (Fong & Murphy, 2006). The message on JiaDa’s QQ group suggested that rural migrants seem to have already accepted this denigrating discourse, which echoes various studies among marginalized groups of Chinese people who tend to internalize the judgement of “mainstream” society that they are “backward” or “uncivilized” (Fong & Murphy, 2006). On the other hand, the implicit message sent by the QQ group seems to be that “human quality” can be effectively improved online.

In terms of utilizing visual posts to articulate personal aspirations, Lily, a 19-year-old factory worker, provides a typical case. Most of the images Lily posted on her QQ were artistic photos of beautiful women in gorgeous dresses which she collected online (Figure 2). On Lily’s QQ, there was not the slightest trace of her life as an assembly line worker or her lived environment in the factory town. The only set of photographs of herself was produced by the local photography studio. It took Lily half a month’s salary to have these photos taken to “record her most beautiful self” in her own words. By “most beautiful self” she refers to the look that took the stylist two hours to produce by applying make-up and dressing her in an evening dress with extra padding around her breasts and hips (Figure 3).

The truth that these artistic photographs held for Lily was not about her everyday “authentic” look, but her real desire to become a “most beautiful self” who can fit into the online space. In Bonnie Adrian’s (2003) study of bridal photography, artist photos that transformed the images of Chinese young women beyond recognition are regarded as a significant ritual marking a woman’s self-awareness and self-expression of being a young, attractive, independent woman before she becomes exhausted by household work and family duties. “Photography is prized not for its ability to capture lived experience but for its capacity to create ‘memories’ markedly different from the goings-on of everyday life” (Adrian, 2003: 10). The acknowledgement of this creativity of photography provides a different perspective, given these offline precedents to Lily’s

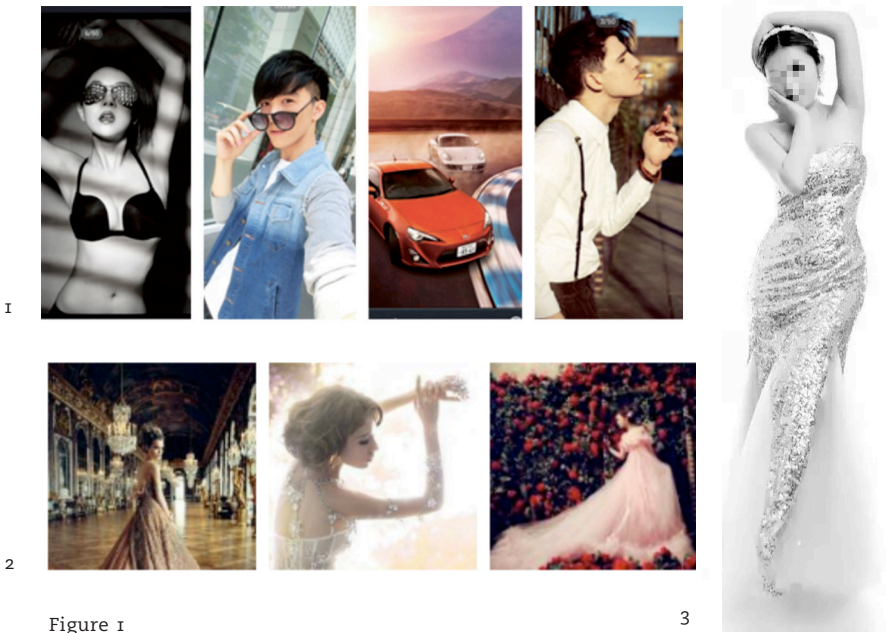


Figure 1
Sample of images on JiaDa's QQ group album

Figure 2
Sample of images on Lily's QQ album

Figure 3
The "artistic photo" of Lily

use of her "once-in-a-life-time" artistic photographs to create her online image.

The postings of both JiaDa and Lily are not anecdotes. A systematic visual analysis based on 7,500 visual posts (the last 20 visual posts of each participant) among 377 migrant workers in GoodPath during fieldwork shows that about 71% of young men (aged 25 and below) and 86% of young women posted these "fantasy" photos depicting an ideal lifestyle rather than actual life in offline situations (Wang, 2016: 77-78). The analogue photograph was regarded as an object of memory, a technical facility to retain an image beyond memory. The proliferation of social media images in the digital age has become such a ubiquitous part of everyday communication that today "images used in social media are so removed from everything previously called photography that the semantic continuity may be misleading" (Miller, 2015). The kind of image consumption found on social media among migrant workers casts further light on the constituent relations between subject and object. As Miller suggests, in mass consumption, objects are translated from an alienable to an inalienable condition as the "the vast morass of possible goods is replaced by the specificity of the particular term" (Miller, 1987: 190) and "the object is transformed by its intimate association with a particular individual or social group" (Miller, 1987: 191). The images posted on rural migrants' social media profiles, as well as the specificity of social visibility online, serve to detach people from their offline situation and construct a new subjectivity with self-respect online.

DESIRED SOCIALITY ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Traditionally, non-kinship ties are taken less seriously in Chinese society, and people avoid introducing a social contact as a “friend” since this category fails to provide any background information about the person (Smart, 1999). The very concept of “friendship” as a form of social relationship only started to gain importance during the processes of modernisation when people became free of dependency on the land and started to encounter and co-operate with others outside of kin ties and regional social networks (Bell & Coleman, 1999). This research project started out with the assumption that social media would play a key role in facilitating re-connection between kin. However, the ethnography found that this was not the case for young migrant workers. In GoodPath many young migrant workers left home to ‘become independent’ from the older generation, which made it possible for them to experience something new, fit into and then take part in urban life. Breaking down the pre-existing structure of social relationships was perceived as an essential part of growing up and becoming a modern citizen – to use the terminology of Victor Turner (1969) in characterising rites of passage as the creation of an “anti-structure.”

Meanwhile, most generalised accounts of modern China stress the role of schooling and education. Factory workers are a vast and significant exception to these common claims about the close relationship between Chinese people and educational aspirations. Most rural youth in GoodPath left their villages and entered the factories between the age of 15 and their early 20s when most of their urban peers were still attending school. What these young rural migrants missed was not just formal education, but the chance to develop social skills within the relatively secure environment provided by schools. In this context, social media had become the place where these young people could meet peers and practise friendship (Wang, 2016).

“Without discarding the old, there would be no coming of the new” – this folk saying has been applied many times by people to justify their friending principles on social media. Many felt that the people they left behind no longer shared their value system and thus they became less motivated to keep contact with them on social media. Baozi, a 23-year-old apprentice cook at a local restaurant, would regularly delete his social media contacts:

Some of those [the contacts he deleted] are my fellow villagers and relatives... I guess we don't share a common language anymore. Those who stay in villages worry about different things... well, without discarding the old there would be no coming of the new.

In post-socialist China, young people have developed “a self-conscious enthusiasm for coherence in their search for a new cosmopolitan humanity,” which “emerged out of the upheavals and excitement within the uncertainties of social life” (Rofel, 2007: 197). This is a situation the older generation have

never encountered and thus have no experience to share. Yan, Y. (2003) also observed how young people were gaining increasing control of their own lives and had no problem going against the wishes of their parents and other senior family members in the rural community. However, in GoodPath, the young rural migrants still felt the surveillance and pressure from the older generation but tried to avoid it. Xiaozhi, a 19-year-old factory worker, had a few relatives in GoodPath, all working at factories. Once over dinner, one of Xiaozhi's aunts told her not to spend so much on shopping, recalling that when she was her age, she had contributed money to the family. Xiaozhi blushed and left without finishing her dinner. Before long, her QQ status was updated, saying "QQ is the only unpolluted land left where old women all shut their mouth." Later Xiaozhi explained: "They know nothing but still point fingers, I had enough... at least on QQ I don't need to listen to their rubbish." The fact that Xiaozhi had no family member or relative on her QQ made the platform her "only unpolluted land."

In GoodPath, although people still tended to address one another as "fellow villager" (*lao xiang*) or "fellow worker" (*gong you*), rather than "friend" in offline situations, it seemed that the situation had changed on social media. The capacity to make new friends online was regarded as convincing evidence of one's personal charm and modern taste. As 23-year-old Bingbing remarked: "If you remain in a small village you will never know the importance of friendship... people in cities all have many chances to meet new friends, and they have many friends." The majority of contacts on social media did not come from kinship or regional ties, and even strangers played an important role. It was not unusual to see people spending hours on QQ chatting with "online friends" (*wang you*) with whom they had no offline connections at all. This reflects a more general acceptability of strangers as a result of experiences with social media in contemporary China (McDonald, 2016).

A representative case was provided by a factory forklift truck driver, Feige, who was highly active in various QQ groups. Even though Feige hardly knew the real names of his online friends, he found chatting with them was most enjoyable and relaxing. He felt that people made friends with him not because of any pragmatic concerns, such as asking for money, and among online friends he was not judged as a rural migrant – "The friendship online is much purer," Feige remarked. Contrary to the widespread idea that relationships mediated by digital technology are not as authentic as offline relationships (Fröding & Peterson, 2012; Turkle, 2011), Feige's case showed that online relationships may feel purer and more authentic than the offline. The common view amongst migrant workers was that the voluntarism of these online relationships that have not been imposed on them by outside forces resulted in their greater authenticity.

The new online relationship also allows for a different kind of communication. Like many of his peers, Baozi's connection with his family back in the

village was mainly via phone calls. In these phone calls, practical concerns such as daily errands, wages, and job hunting predominated, whereas on Baozi's QQ profile, more than half of the articles he shared over the past year were inspiring stories of successful men. From time to time, there were also articles about life philosophy. It was also while on QQ chatting that Baozi told me most of his personal stories. Baozi commented: "There is no point talking about feelings or daydreams with your family. Family needs solid things... like money or a stable job... Online you can talk about feelings or dreams... and you feel comfortable talking about these things here [on QQ] and everybody on QQ does so..."

For Liping, Feige, Baozi and many others, social media is the place where they are not excluded as "outsiders," and the proper place to express themselves alternatively. It is not only because the platform provides different possibilities for communication, but also because it has become normative. The online space is perceived as the place where such communication and self-expression are justified since "everybody on QQ does so," as Baozi observed. It has become a practice in the sense given by Bourdieu, one dependent on the "economy of the proper place" (de Certeau, 1984: 55). The sense of which action is possible and appropriate depends on the specific place that an individual occupies (Bourdieu, 1975). It was challenging to make friends offline because of shortened schooling and social discriminations, as well as the pragmatic use of interpersonal relations to survive in a floating life. These factors account for the use of social media as an alternative "proper" place for young migrants to participate in the new sociality, as well as to break away from the old social structure. Practising friendships online has been integrated into the process of coming of age and has become an important way for these young people to gain their new identity.

Migrant workers in this study had no decision of where to be born or into what kind of situation – like every human being, they were "thrown" into the world. But as Heidegger puts it, *Dasein* is not present-at-hand, but the possibility of various ways of being. Furthermore, as the theory of objectification proposes, "as an intrinsic part of being, and in order to attempt an understanding of the world, the subject continually externalizes outwards, producing forms or attaching itself to the structures through which form may be created" (Miller, 1987: 179-180). "A subject cannot be envisaged outside the process of its own becoming" (Miller, 1987: 179). Here we have seen the ways in which young rural migrants explore the possibilities of their own "becoming," both in terms of self-presentation and in terms of developing a desirable sociality on social media. The next section brings a further focus on the lived experience of "being-in-the-world" facilitated by social media.

BEING-IN-THE-WORLD: SOCIAL MEDIA AS HOME

For Heidegger, the homeland (*Heimat*) is where human beings exist in a state of "nearness to Being." As such, he calls for a return to the homeland (Heidegger,

1977a: 241-242). By equating the emergence of *Dasein* with the homeland, this Heideggerian ideology has influenced many traditional studies of migration and diaspora, providing a philosophical underpinning of their work with displaced people's desire to return to their homeland and satisfy a longing for home and the sense of belonging (Falzon, 2003; Safran, 1991).

Far from being this desired return, in GoodPath "homeland" seems to evoke ambivalent and often negative feelings. Longing to become modern citizens, young rural migrants are eager to be done with their rural background, which is always associated with the homeland. "Post-Mao development has robbed the countryside of its ability to serve as a locus for rural youth to construct a meaningful identity" (Yan, H., 2003: 579) The countryside is constructed as a "wasteland of 'backwardness' and 'tradition'" (Yan, H, 2003: 586). On the other hand, what everyone regards as their floating life constantly reminds them of the continued importance of having a homeland. For most migrant workers, returning has become a myth. First of all, they are very likely to lose their financial independence, or even the chance to make a living back in the villages, and, in any case, people see themselves as no longer belonging to these rural communities. As increasing numbers of the migrant population are born during the "floating" life, more and more young people have no real-life connection to the villages. When "home" refers to the place of origin, it is not automatically impregnated with the usual sense of place of belonging where people "feel at home" (Siu, 2007).

Such mixed feelings about homeland were manifested in people's social media profiles. Even though interpersonal communication with home village contacts was in many cases left out on QQ, visual elements of their homeland gained popularity on people's social media profiles. Around 15 per cent of rural migrants' QQ profiles had a specific online album called "homeland" (*lao jia*). For example, Hua, a factory worker in her 30s, uploaded large numbers of photographs of the mountain behind her native village to her QQ album. She had been floating for almost a decade and only visited her home village three times during that period. Hua thought she would never move back to her home village, as she explained: "My home village is a place you always miss, but not really a place you want to return to." "History is always ambiguous, always messy, and people remember, and therefore construct the past in ways that reflect their present need for meaning" (Ang, 1993). It seems that by posting the home village images on QQ, all the negative memories and associations of village life had been excised, leaving only the positive symbolic meaning of homeland. Once again, then, we see how online spaces enable rural migrants to construct an alternative site of homeland with which they feel they can relate more positively because they have created and crafted these albums, in contrast to the physical homeland which they merely happen to have come from.

Further scrutiny of rural migrants' social media profiles revealed diverse forms of homeland-making. While most homeland postings contain photo-

graphs of physical villages, some carried no visual resemblance at all. Chun Mei, a 25-year-old factory worker, shared a posting with the title “If you feel tired, please go back to our village” on her WeChat (Figure 4). The posting reads:

If one day we all feel tired, let's go back to our village together, not to pursue our aspirations, but merely for the transportation free of traffic jams and the air free of pollution... during the daytime we can work together in our little vegetable garden, feed chickens and play with dogs, in the evening we can visit old friends and neighbours...

Rather than using a photo of the village, Chun Mei chose an “enjoying-beach-holiday” image as the background picture.



Figure 4
The homeland posting on Chun Mei's WeChat profile

The home village Chun Mei depicted on social media, which she and her husband had left nine years previously, is completely different. Recently the couple had to move back to their home village to take care of their seriously ill parents. Chun Mei's husband complained at length about village life: "Had it not been because of my parents...we would definitely not have gone back to the rubbish countryside." Given the tough situation that the young couple encountered in their home village, what Chun Mei posted becomes even more puzzling.

The ethnography provides a plausible explanation. The program *Where are we going, Dad?* – Chun Mei's favourite live TV show – is about five celebrity fathers and their children travelling to rural places. In one episode, a movie star remarked: "even though it's tough, I enjoy the pure and natural life here [in the countryside]." Chun Mei demurred: "I really don't understand why the urbanites think the countryside is so good! Maybe they had too much sweetness, and they're looking for some bitterness..."

Chun Mei's remark echoed another comment made by a young factory worker. When I asked to take some photos of their place, the host, in his 40s, appeared reluctant and urged his wife to sort out the room quickly. His suggestion was disdained by his son, who exclaimed: "There is no need to make the room look better... they all like these things. The more rural, the better!" The 17-year-old young son's irony skewers this urban aesthetic which values the authenticity of the rural. Such awareness emerged from their consumption of popular content in the mass media and on social media, as well as their own experience in urban areas. Picking on urban taste is regarded as essential to becoming urban citizens (Fang, 2011). So, the repudiation of their place of origin is deflected by their need to incorporate bucolic ideals of the urban imaginary re-cast as nostalgia. By setting themselves apart from the countryside and appreciating it as the "other" place on social media, Chun Mei gave a future to her rural past with the self-expectation of becoming urban. Social media is thus the chrysalis within which homeland undergoes a metamorphosis from dirty grub to fantasy butterfly.

David Morley (2000) argues that home in the digital age is a transitory construct where new media not only articulate the "home" but also transgress its boundaries. Vincent Descombes defines home as a virtual space: to be at home is to be at ease with the rhetoric of the people with whom the person shares a life (Auge, 1995: 108). "Homeland" and "home" are, in many cases, interchangeable in daily conversation in GoodPath. Regardless of the differences between "homeland" and "home" in various specific situations, in most cases a longing for home or homeland begins when people feel "not at home."

Lily, the factory girl who took artistic photos, lived with her sister in a simple room that used to be a storage space for a small grocery shop. Without proper ventilation and air conditioning, it was literally a sauna on hot summer

days. However, this did not prevent Lily from spending most of her leisure time sitting on the edge of her bed, working on her QQ with eyes glued to the screen. It seemed that the physical surroundings had no influence on her at all when she immersed herself in the QQ world. The moment when she finally “returned” to the offline world, Lily looked up and sighed: “Life outside the mobile phone is unbearable.” Such an extreme statement only makes sense once we consider the physical place in which Lily had no choice but to stay and the digital space where she chose to live in. Here the feeling of being-in-the-world has little to do with the physical place as Lily demonstrated how she and her fellow rural migrants managed to create and sustain a sense of belonging and autonomy online.

Human beings are never truly at home in the world, indeed: “Not-being-at-home must be conceived existentially and ontologically as the more primordial phenomenon” (Heidegger, 2000: 41). Nevertheless, the feeling of not-being-at-home seemed likely to be overwhelming among this floating population. On Chinese New Year 2014, Yue, a 21-year-old girl, posted on QQ:

Nowhere makes me feel at home. Nowhere! Well, QQ is probably the most home-like place, where at least some friends wish me happy new year here... and one of them even gave me a paid QQ decoration (QQ *zhuang ban*)² as a new year’s gift... at least my home on QQ has a new look in the new year.

Yue was forced to get married when she was 17. She managed to run away from her hometown when she was only 19, hoping that she could have a different life, but she was wrong. There was nowhere, no geographical place, to make Yue feel at home. Yet the digital dwelling on QQ, in a way, compensated for this loss. The uncanny feeling of “not-being-at-home” always highlights the inconvenient absence of home, and the desire return, and further contemplation of home, is thus awakened. It was on QQ that Yue managed to express herself, to wish life could have a new look. It was also on QQ that Yue felt she might be able to receive care and friendly wishes from people, rather than, as she remarked, being dumped and betrayed.

There is simply no reason to assume that the online is any less able to be a home than the offline. Jackson (2000: 6) uses his ethnography of aboriginal Australia to illustrate how the meaning of home cannot necessarily be sought in the substantive and how people use “house” as a verb in as much as the term refers to fleeting things. Based on fieldwork with herding families who traverse the Mongolian-Russian borders, Rebecca Empson (2011) provides intimate insights into the ways in which photographic montages and mirrors in domestic spaces bring relations into being and articulate a notion of home for these families who have no private land or state of their own. Both ethnographies allude to Mary Douglas’s argument (1991) that home starts by bringing space under control and home is not necessarily fixed in space. Yue had no control over which family she was born into, and when she tried to run away, she lost

control of her offline life. Social media in her lived experience was the only place where she could find some control: hence it was the place where she felt most at home.

“Imagination,” writes Bachelard (2014: 43), “separates us from the past as well as from reality: it faces the future.” In *The Poetics of Space*, he praises imagination’s power to realise the world’s potential. In Bachelard’s mind, “the highest act of imagination is the will to attune oneself to the saying of being itself” (Kearney, 2014: 17). Facilitated by the digital, imagination, stimulated by aspirations, gives birth to the digital *Dasein* where human existence can feel at home in the world. “In objectification, all we have is a process in time by which the very act of creating form creates consciousness or capacity such as skill and thereby transforms both form and the self-consciousness of that which has consciousness, or the capacity of that which now has skill” (Miller, 2005: 9). What Heidegger probably missed is the creative imagination, which has been further empowered by the affordance of social media in the process of objectification, so that *Dasein* can re-inhabit a world created by itself. Heidegger failed to pursue certain implications of his own arguments (Larsen & Johnson, 2012). “*Dasein* is its possibility” (Heidegger, 1962: 42): however, by prioritising an idealised homeland as the place where *Dasein* can be near to its authenticity, Heidegger overlooked its other possibilities. Responding to Heidegger’s claim that the authenticity of dwelling is destroyed by the spread of technology and mass production, Harvey forcefully accuses him of “a pervasive elitism”: “Some people can claim the status of authenticity by virtue of their capacity to dwell in real places... while the rest of us – the majority – live empty and soulless lives in a ‘placeless’ world” (Harvey, 2009: 187). Chinese migrant workers may well be categorised as a “placeless” or “floating” population given their offline living situations, but there is simply no reason for us to overlook their digital *Dasein*, which is as profound and authentic as any form of human existence.

CONCLUSION

It might seem surprising to equate Heidegger’s existential philosophy (1977b) with the everyday practices of social media among Chinese rural migrants, given Heidegger’s deep scepticism of technologies of communication. Clearly, the circumstances investigated in this paper could not have been envisaged by Heidegger. But it is still important to see just how challenging an ethnography within the digital age can be to what has been regarded as an inspiring approach to the very notion of human existence and the issue of place represented by a phenomenological perspective. There is an obvious temptation to dismiss the understanding and experiences of these factory workers because, in their creation of these worlds, they ignore those transformations of political economy and history that led them to have these desires and aspirations in the first place. Huge and powerful forces represented by rapid industrialization, the

Chinese party-state and the pressures of a new consumer economy have also driven this rural migrant population into a desire for modernity characterised by affluence and an urban lifestyle. But if we dismiss their creative interpretations and self-understandings, we would indeed have to be equally dismissive of Heidegger's claims regarding the rural German population that he took to be icons of authenticity, since they too were the creations of historical transformations in the German peasantry and equally powerful economic, religious and political forces. They no more chose to be who they were and their own values than these young Chinese factory workers. Anthropology has retained the capacity to both insist that we recognize and give weight to the historical forces that create *habitus* and treat as authentic the practices that we encounter ethnographically and people's ability to create a new normativity.

Following the theory of objectification (Miller, 1987), what needs to be studied are not things or people but processes – which means that we are not studying the adoption of objects by subjects, because there is no fixed thing called social media or fixed group called Chinese migrant workers. Rather, the ethnography shows what the new generation of Chinese migrant workers has become in light of their use of social media and what social media has become in light of its use by Chinese migrant workers (also see Horst & Miller, 2006: 7). From self-crafting to home-creating online, the use of social media among Chinese rural migrants actually represents us with a parallel to the offline-to-online migration taking place simultaneously to the massive rural-to-urban migration (Wang, 2016). Chinese young rural migrants who do not feel at home in their home villages or in the factories and cities, finally encounter a feeling of being-at-home on social media. The home or homeland that was lost, or simply never existed in the physical world, comes to life online. The labour which produces humanity is not the factory work but the craftsmanship on social media, which produces not only themselves but also the world within which they dwell.

Today's world is often characterized by words such as hyper-mobility, time-space compression, globalization and the like. Across the world, fewer and fewer people live their lives in the places where they were born. Perhaps at no other time in history has the question of the relationship between identity and place seemed so urgent (Jackson, 2000: 1). The intention of this paper has been to discuss what may well appear as something like the extreme use of current social media by Chinese rural migrants. This population is radical to the degree that they can be described as a "social media population." Spurning the sociality of both their place of origin and the factory floor, the only possibilities given to them offline, they embrace the opportunities facilitated by social media to the fullest. But I would argue that there are grounds for thinking that the kinds of situation I have been describing here will become more common around the globe in the future.

“There is no *a priori* subject which acts or is acted upon. The subject is inherently dynamic, reacting and developing according to the nature of its projections and experience” (Miller, 1987: 179). *Dasein* is not a given, but something made; not a bounded entity, but a dynamic model of being-in-the-world, which is defined by connections and relationships rather than physical location. The site that holds the desired sociality and self is the key place for human existence, and such a site need not be a geographic location. The actual geographical location in which all kinds of migrants are situated may come to matter less and less – to some, like Chinese migrant workers, even reduced largely to the functional facilities of working, eating and sleeping. However, when it comes to their emotional geography, the place where they feel they are actually dwelling at the time, it may not be their current physical location. More generally in modern life, in the face of digital ubiquity, even for non-migrants, online activities have become an integral part of more and more people’s daily life all over the world (Miller et al., 2016). Rather than being a fantasy or the other place, the spatiality of the digital has been absorbed into the fabric of ordinary everyday life. “Most serious thought in our time struggles with the feeling of homelessness,” as Susan Sontag (1986: 53) keenly observed. Although the feeling of “placelessness” may manifest itself in a somewhat extreme form in the case of floating populations, as a consequence of mobility it is a feeling shared by migrants and non-migrants alike, especially in the age of migration (Castles, Haas & Miller, 2013). The critical concerns that really matter are the relationships, the site of connections, rather than the physical locations of the participants.

As Miller (1987: 11) points out, “Perhaps the major shortcoming of many theories of the concept of culture is that they identify culture with a set of objects... rather than seeing it as an evaluation of the relationship through which objects are constituted as social forms”. Instead of seeing the digital infrastructure as “a set of objects” that provides affordance to human societies, I argue that the ubiquitous digital has indeed become the place of daily life where social relations are navigated, and social forms and norms emerge. For anthropology, the possibilities of the digital as the dwelling place and of the digital *Dasein* need to be taken seriously if we are to understand human existence and sociality in the digital age.

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NOTES

- 1 The names of the town and informants are all pseudonyms.
- 2 The digital application on QQ allows user to apply specific a profile style, including head banner, background picture and music, font, tailored layout, and so on. QQ offers a range of free decorative elements, as well as paid ones that people can purchase for themselves or other users.

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O *DASEIN* DIGITAL DOS MIGRANTES RURAIS CHINESES

Resumo

Este artigo procura reconhecer as possibilidades radicais nos modos pelos quais a existência humana é percebida e construída na era digital. Uma etnografia de 15 meses, focalizando o uso das redes sociais entre os operários chineses, é empregada para abrir uma conversa com pensamentos filosóficos sobre a existência humana e pensamentos antropológicos sobre objetificação. Afinal, as mídias sociais são mais do que uma forma de comunicação ou uma tecnologia que facilita a conexão entre diferentes locais. Ao explorar as três camadas de experiência existencial dos migrantes rurais chineses no contexto do uso onipresente da mídia social, o artigo sugere que podemos começar a considerar o grau em que a mídia digital é em si um lugar em que as pessoas realmente vivem e se sentem em casa. O reconhecimento de tal construção de lugar por meio do digital nos permite repensar a relação entre a materialidade e as possibilidades digitais para a existência humana e explorar mais o processo fundamental de objetivação pelas lentes da antropologia digital.

Palavras-chave

Dasein;
objetificação;
mídias sociais,
antropologia digital;
migrantes rurais chineses;
migração.

THE DIGITAL *DASEIN* OF CHINESE RURAL MIGRANTS

Abstract

This paper sets out to acknowledge the radical possibilities in the way in which human existence is perceived and constructed in the digital age. A 15-month ethnography, focused on the use of social media among Chinese factory workers, is employed to create a conversation with philosophical thoughts on human existence and anthropological thoughts on objectification. Social media is more than a form of communication, or a technology, that facilitates the connection between different locations. By exploring the three layers of existential experience of Chinese rural migrants in the context of ubiquitous social media use, this paper suggests that we might start to consider the degree to which digital media is itself a place in which people actually live and feel at home. The acknowledgement of such place-making via the digital allows us to re-think the relationship between the materiality and digital possibilities for human existence and further explore the fundamental process of objectification through the lens of digital anthropology.

Keywords

Dasein;
objectification;
social media,
digital anthropology;
Chinese rural migrants;
migration.